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Hit the Road, Jack, and Don't Come Back

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Погнали: We're off, let's get going

Almost everything I've learned about the Russian language since graduating from college comes from hearing a word or phrase or reading it and thinking: Now that's interesting. What does that mean? Where does that come from?

And then I go down the Russian rabbit hole where I burrow among books and articles for hours and hours, until hunger, thirst or the pleasant fatigue that comes from figuring something out drives me back into the light.

All that is a fancy way of saying that I got curious about a slang expression and now my new favorite verb pair is гнать/погнать. The familiar meaning is to chase something or someone, but there is so much more in these little words.

Let's begin with the imperfective гнать — and first, let me remind you of how this verb gets conjugated: я гоню, он гонит, они гонят, мы гоним, вы гоните. Got it? Onward to meaning.

Here's the first sense: Целая свора собак где-то далеко гонит добычу (Somewhere in the distance a whole pack of dogs is chasing their prey.) You can also chase something or someone away, which can be literal or figurative. One guy did not want to rent his apartment to refugees: Гоните, гоните их! У них, может быть, вши! (Evict them! They might have lice!) Another was depressed: Гоню от себя мрачные мысли (I'm casting off dark thoughts.)

Or гнать can be the process of kicking someone out: Ирина решила гнать неверного мужа из дома, но мать сказала: ◙ Ты что, сошла с ума? Кто же отдаёт родного мужа в чужие руки? (Irina decided to kick out her cheating husband, but her mother said, "Are you nuts? Who gives her own husband to some stranger?") If Irina succeeds, despite her mother's objections, she'll use another perfective form of the verb — выгнать. Выгнала его, сволочь! (I kicked him out, the bastard!)

There are other things that can be banished. Dog and cat owners know what I mean: Надо гнать глистов перед прививками (You have to worm your pet before giving him his shots.)

I suppose because the process of chasing someone or something usually involves speed, гнать can mean going fast or making someone else — or something else, like a car — go fast. This is often used in the negative when the weather is bad: Очень много снега— поосторожнее, не гони (There's a lot of snow — take it easy, don't rush.) Or it's what you sing when the wine is flowing too abundantly: Ямщик, не гони лошадей, мне некуда больше спешить (Driver, don't spur the horses on, there's nowhere I've got to rush to).

Another meaning of гнать is when hurrying someone along turns into pushing, forcing, moving, or transporting. This meaning generally has a negative connotation: Он говорит, что еле ходит, а ты гонишь его на работу (He says he can hardly walk, and you're forcing him go to work!) После падения Берлинской стены, сначала офицеров гнали из Германии и Венгрии (After the fall of the Berlin Wall, first they made the officers leave Germany and Hungary). Мы гоним финансовые потоки в Чечню (We're flooding Chechnya with money.)

And then the rushing and forcing and shipping somehow morphs again to mean producing something, often in large quantities: Ходить проторённой дорожкой Николай не любит, ширпотреб гнать не позволяет творческая натура (Nikolai doesn't like to trod the beaten path, and his artistic nature won't let him crank out run-of-the-mill consumer goods.) You can also make money with the word гнать, presumably not on a printing press in your garage: Слушай, твой сосед стал гнать бабки! Чем он занимается? (Hey, your neighbor started to make money hand over fist. What does he do?)

Another thing you can produce is delicious, or at least intoxicating: Самогонку мы гнали на свадьбу (We made some moonshine for the wedding.)

Finally, one slangy meaning of гнать is to really give it to someone: Чего он всё время на меня гонит? (Why is he always giving me a hard time?) Another slangy meaning is to talk nonsense, to lie, to slander someone: Чё ты гонишь? Не верю, что любишь меня! (What line of crap are you giving me? I don't believe you love me!)

There are also устойчивые выражения (set phrases) with гнать. Гнать в шею (literally to push someone in the neck) is like the English "to give someone the bum's rush," that is, show someone the door. Гнать волну can be used literally to mean "to make waves," and figuratively "to make a fuss." In English, we mix up our metaphors. Не надо гнать волну might be "don't make waves" or "don't rock the boat" or "don't stir things up."

The perfective form of the verb, погнать, can mean to start the act of chasing, banishing, or forcing. Мы её сначала смехом погнали впереди себя, а потом и совсем угнали (We first started to push her ahead of us just for fun, and then we chased her away completely.) Annoyingly, it can also mean to complete the act of chasing, banishing, or forcing. For example, in the old days, someone wrote: Его исключили из партии, кажется, скоро погонят с работы (He was expelled from the Party, so he'll soon be fired from work.)

In slang, though, in the past tense plural it means "let's get going," "let's get this show on the road." When you've packed the car, checked your list five times, and are almost sure you have everything you need for your road trip, you say: Ну что, погнали? (Let's hit the road, eh?)

Or you say it when you know you are about to go down another rabbit hole.

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